World view

By Chérifa
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How universities can assist in foiling predatory journals

Training by institutions on publishing norms could help to stem the tide of people falling prey to predatory publishers.

Predatory journals are a known scourge of science. They collect publication fees and publish articles without adequate (or sometimes any) peer review, ultimately wasting researchers' time and money and undermining public trust in science. But few studies have sought to understand what makes authors submit articles to these journals.

In a preprint this year (see go.nature.com/452arzy), my colleagues and I surveyed 2,200 researchers – 86 of whom responded – who had authored articles in journals by the publisher OMICS, which was ordered by a US federal judge in 2018 to pay US$50.1 million in damages for deceptive business practices, but still operates.

What I learnt has considerably changed my understanding of predatory journals and has revealed steps that institutions should take to limit these journals' harmful influence.

I was not surprised that most respondents were from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) nor that some knowingly submitted to predatory journals, seeing them as a way to get ahead in what they perceived as a cut-throat and unfair academic system.

I'm from Algeria, so I know that researchers from LMICs face difficult working conditions. Many find it hard to navigate the complexities of scientific publishing today, especially now that publishers are changing to open-access models. These authors often have poor English skills and their knowledge of scientific publishing standards is limited.

Even so, I was shocked by how adrift many authors seemed when faced with the workings of scholarly publishing. Many were not aware that they had fallen prey to a predatory publisher. Several researchers mistook me for a journal and replied to my survey e-mail by attaching articles, with comments thanking me in advance for their "next quick publication" or asking me "how much it will cost them in dollars".

Research institutions, too, are falling down on the job of providing basic education in scholarly publishing norms, especially to scientists in LMICs.

Predatory publishers step into this void and accustom uninformed researchers to scientific publishing that is fast and obstacle-free. Once hooked, some authors keep going back to these predatory journals, confusing speed with quality. "OMICS is open access, relatively straightforward and timely. Much less of a hassle and less arrogant than old-school society journals," one survey respondent wrote.

Other authors had recognized the fraud, but were too late: they tried to withdraw their papers before publication, but the journals published them anyway. Such testimonies

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helped me to understand how vulnerable these authors are to the 'publish or perish' culture. It's not uncommon for them to keep these experiences to themselves out of shame.

A few authors revealed experiences that cross into the realm of cybercrime: demands to pay the article-processing charge (APC) a second time; incessant calls, e-mails or messages on social media; and intimidation. Two responses even mentioned physical threats by journal representatives. One author wrote that they were "bullied repeatedly by phone calls and e-mails" to pay an APC for an article that was published without their consent. I felt helpless when confronted with these testimonies and requests for help.

Institutions can provide education and foster a culture that protects researchers from these experiences. Excellent resources already exist: Think Check Submit, a checklist available in more than 40 languages, helps researchers to select a trustworthy journal (see thinkchecksubmit.org). What is missing are resources in local languages describing the scientific publishing process, its culture and principles, and strategies to navigate it. These could include forums in which researchers can exchange ideas, ask questions and discuss issues with colleagues who have more experience. The resources could provide information on how to understand the complex open-access system and the importance of archiving preprints, and should teach researchers norms: legitimate publishers do not normally use WhatsApp, a free instant-messaging platform, to ask authors to pay an APC or submit a paper, for instance.

The healthy open-access publishing environment in Latin America provides a good example. Researchers in the region can publish in journals that are supported and recognized by an entire ecosystem: universities, libraries and funders. Institutions consider publications in local journals when they perform tenure and promotion assessments. SciELO, begun in Brazil, is emblematic: a cooperative of scientific journals that enables researchers to develop the skills needed to navigate the processes of scientific publishing.

Partnerships between institutions in LMICs and those in wealthy countries can also help researchers to access publications and integrate with the international scientific community. Initiatives could include institutions on both sides hosting visiting scientists, providing mentors or teaching researchers how to write and publish papers.

Institutions could also ensure that publication is not the sole determinant of a researcher's career and reputation: scientists share their knowledge through many activities, including teaching and outreach.

Predatory journals prey on the gaps in institutional policies. Only through vigilance can institutions support and protect their researchers from harassment, fraud and the waste of papers that, in the hands of legitimate publishers, could have contributed to the world.